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The Shades of Summer

Who can blame you? After a typical bleak Montana winter and a cooler and wetter than usual spring, who doesn't want to race out into this glorious summer sunshine to work and play?

While we in public health applaud your quest for physical activity, we hope you'll take a few precautions to ensure that your time in the sun brings pleasure, not pain.

Because, when it comes to sunshine, you *can* have too much of a good thing. Sunshine is an important source of vitamin D, essential for building healthy bones. But overexposure can damage your skin, causing sunburn, premature aging, wrinkling, and skin cancer, including deadly melanoma. It can also cause damage to the eyes and possibly even blindness.

Yet, all you need is a little shade to make your outdoor activities safer and more comfortable.

Shades for the Skin

All too many of us still think of a tan as a sign of good health. But tanning is actually the skin's response to damage caused by ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. Sunburn is an indication of more severe damage.

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation. Every hour, one American dies from this disease. By far the most common risk factor is exposure to the sun and other sources of UV rays, including tanning beds.

The incidence of malignant melanoma, a potentially fatal form of skin cancer, has been increasing in Montana and the United States for the past 25 years, according to the state Department of Public Health and Human Services. It's now one of the most common cancers among teenagers and young adults.

As we get older, our skin often becomes thick, wrinkled, and leathery. But this isn't an inevitable part of aging. Up to 90 percent of visible skin changes that are commonly attributed to age are actually caused by the sun, the Skin Cancer Foundation reports.

Staying in the shade is one simple way to reduce your risk of skin damage. In the continental United States, the sun's UV rays are strongest in the late spring and early summer and between 10 a.m. and 4

p.m. daily. In other words, they're most dangerous when your shadow is shorter than you are. That's a good time to seek shade, hang out under an umbrella, or head inside for a while.

Don't count on clouds to protect you. They filter but don't block UV rays. And remember that sunshine reflects off surfaces like water, cement, sand, and snow. Even when you're in the shade, your best bet to protect your skin is to wear sunscreen or protective clothing.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offer these recommendations regarding sunscreen:

- Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen (one that blocks both UVA and UVB rays) with an SPF (sun protection factor) of 15 or higher. (UVA and UVB refer to different ultraviolet wavelengths in the light spectrum.)
- Apply generously, making sure you cover your face, lips, hands, arms, shoulders, ears, back of your neck, tops of your feet, and under your chin. You'll need about 2 tablespoons to cover your entire body.
- Apply 30 minutes before going out into the sun.
- Reapply every two hours, as well as after swimming or sweating heavily.
- Check your sunscreen's expiration date; if it's expired or if you've had it for more than three years, toss it and buy more.

Shades for the Eyes

The same harmful UV rays that damage skin also increase your risk of developing eye problems, such as cataracts and, possibly, macular degeneration. Both of these can lead to blindness. If you spend lots of time on the water or the beach without adequate eye protection, you can also develop photokeratitis, or sunburn of the cornea. This painful condition can cause a short-term loss of vision.

Reducing these risks is simple – and stylish, too: slip on a pair of sunglasses. They not only protect your eyes from the UV rays, but they also protect the tender skin around your eyes from sunburn.

The FDA has these recommendations for choosing sunglasses:

- Choose shades that block 99-100 percent of both UVA and UVB rays.
- Lenses should be dark enough to reduce glare, but not so dark that they distort colors (like traffic signals). If you can see your eyes easily through the lenses, they're probably not dark enough.
- Wraparound sunglasses are your best buy; they cover the entire eye socket and block the sun from the sides as well as the front.
- Don't assume that a higher price tag or a darker tint will give you better protection. Even inexpensive drugstore sunglasses will work. Just make sure the label specifies strong UV protection.
- Polarized lenses can help reduce glare, so they're great for the beach, lake, or ski slopes. But polarization is unrelated to UV protection.

People who wear contact lenses with UV protection should still wear sunglasses, since contact lenses don't cover the entire eye. And be sure the children in your life have sunglasses of their own. Check the label before you buy: toy sunglasses may have no UV protection at all.

Eye-care specialists recommend wearing a brimmed hat along with your sunglasses anytime you're in the sun long enough to get a tan or a burn.

So I'll see you out there gamboling in that summer sun. Don't be surprised if you don't recognize me; I'll be wearing my Foster Grants!

For more information on the health effects of overexposure to sun:

- CDC: http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/basic_info/prevention.htm
- FDA: <http://www.fda.gov/Radiation-EmittingProducts/RadiationEmittingProductsandProcedures/Tanning/ucm116445.htm>
- Skin Cancer Foundation: <http://www.skincancer.org/Skin-Cancer-Facts/>

The Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department's mission is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis & Clark County residents.

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